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ABSTRACT

Until the 1960s the rule of science was a characteristic of modernity in academic life. Since then, a postmodern trend has been running counter to a faith in a universal and objective scientific methodology. Postmodernists have taught us that there are no single truths, that there are many valuable perspectives, and that the line between the subjective and the objective is very blurred. Postmodern perspectives in the social sciences offer the opportunity for validating the unique contributions of those who think outside the prevailing paradigm of technical rationality--women, rural residents, minority groups, and anyone whose referents are not those of the industrial northern European world. Many premises we have come to accept as truth are antithetical to rural values and concerns. These premises include: bigger is better, all technology is equally useful, personalization must be sacrificed to progress, and higher outputs automatically improve the quality of life. Rural practitioners in social work and education have been saying for decades that theories validated in the cities were not useful in non-urban environments, but the dominant world view denied the validity of their position. Postmodernism allows the exploration of alternatives to standardized tests, curricula, outcomes, and practices and monocultural, monolingual education. Postmodernism permits rural people to seize the authority of their own views; to study, assess, and validate understandings from rural standpoints; and to mobilize us all for change. (Contains 16 references.) (TD)

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The Modern/Post-modern Discussion: Reviewing Where We Are

At a recent seminar on research methods and social inclusion in social work held at the University of Edinburgh, I presented a paper reviewing various postmodern approaches to social work research. In that paper, I emphasized interpretation and argued for renewing social work's commitment to good judgement as well as observation in doing research . I spoke about the growing body of what is broadly termed "postmodernist" literature that is becoming more and more apparent and useful in the social sciences (Martinez-Brawley, 2000). This literature primarily rejects the orthodoxy of the research and practice paradigms that have dominated the helping field in the past three or four decades, opening the door for other possibilities of researching, practicing and knowing. While some postmodern approaches have come under severe criticism by those brought up on a diet of rationality, neutrality, science and the values of the Enlightenment, many post-modern perspectives, including those I will to which I will primarily refer today, have made it possible for social scientist to question unitary doctrines and "Truths", including the monopoly of scientific views in the sociological disciplines. Most valuable is the fact that those post modern approaches emphasize the possibility of knowing in a multitude of ways (Irving,1999; Hartman,1994; Rosenau, 1992).

The broad philosophic discussion in which modernists and postmodernists engaged, and sometimes clashed, focused on "a war on totality and a disavowal of all encompassing single world views" (Giroux, 1995, p.ix). The core of the modern/post-modern debate in social work, for instance, centered on the question of whether social work knowledge proposed one single truth or many truths; whether a single world view, language, form of discourse or paradigm could dominate social work knowledge or whether there were many ways of knowing, practicing, conversing and exchanging. Of course, like in all debates, the issues are never as clear as can be described in a written analysis. However, beyond the many commentaries, polemics, points and counterpoints recently offered in professional books and journals, the question of one or many world views permeates the argument. Furthermore, the voices of many heterogeneous groups among those who practice and are served by social work, have transformed the discussion over world views into an issue that is essential to the survival of the profession. Post-modern approaches offer the opportunity of validating the contributions of women, of minorities and of other populations (such as rural populations) that have often been at the "fringes" of research (Martinez-Brawley and Zorita, 1998).

Postmodern approaches offer alternatives to the rigid paradigms social scientists borrowed from the hard sciences and mistakenly applied to the realm of human relations and social development. For if the knowledge of many helping professions such as community development, social work or education is to be helpful in real life situations, more than data manipulation is likely to be required. While the natural scientist's aim is to determine the regularity of events, to deal with the most predictable aspects of phenomena and to replicate them, the practitioner in human services or education or any other helping art must attend to what is less than regular, to what is unique in many unique contexts. For example, rural practice must deal with what is unique or germane to the rural or small town context, whether or not regularities among them can be identified. Furthermore, practitioners– whether urban or rural-- must also relate to the uniqueness of individuals (for example, unique ways of learning or the idiosyncratic aspects of culture or ethnicity, etc.) Attention to uniqueness— in the sense that the human condition is unique-- is the trademark of the helping professions and here I am including, among others, education, medicine, the ministry. If we ask, why are human services practitioners needed? The answer will frequently be because, simply put, we cannot help people by a formula in a manual; the artistry of relationships is still required. If we ask, why are teachers necessary --even in this age of technological global connections-- the response is likely to be because children learn in different ways and their uniqueness must be respected and nurtured.

Researchers in the helping professions or helping arts cannot hide behind the mask of the "lab" approach to knowing. It is clear that it is no longer sufficient to imitate the natural sciences in dissecting real life into its component parts, while manipulating variables. Through the years we have learned that in helping real people, the total is often more than the sum of its parts. The inert relationships we can often manipulate in artificial environments, may or may not reflect what is actually happening . Of course, on this point I am not alone but I am simply joining many distinguished social scientists who have eloquently argued on this matter (Barnes, 1977 & 1985; Gergen, 1994), for example,

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reminds us that "... in contrast to the mighty oaks of the natural sciences, one might describe the social sciences as a sprawling thicket." (Gergen, 1994, p. 3). In a sprawling thicket, as most ruralites will attest, judgement and interpretation become very important elements in navigating one's way.

My own local newspaper, always a better barometer of what is out there in front of the public than academic journals, recently reprinted a New York Times article reviewing practices in research dissemination (Cohen, 2000:A25). While the article's theme pivoted on the concern about the premature release of findings in social science and educational research, the fact that the public is questioning approaches that in the recent past would have been perceived as flawless. The article cited a number of popularly distributed "news" emanating from research and questioned the pervading belief in statistical manipulation as a source of dogma. In quite an amusing paragraph the journalist writes:

> Remember the Newsweek study that found that a 40 year old woman had a better chance of being killed by a terrorist than getting married? (Oops! A mistake in the statistical calculation.) Practically every week brings reports on what social scientists have to say on topics like who is going to cheat on a spouse, what will turn a child into a mini-Charles Manson or how the computer is turning people into lonely misanthropes. (Cohen, 2000, p. A25)

And for those who may feel the natural sciences were unfairly excluded, the article also mentioned that recently, NASA had "...announced that the apparent discovery in 1998 of a planet outside the solar system was wrong..." a big Ooops! for the naive or unquestioning mind.

Cohen's article did not go as far as I would have wanted it to go . (It is unlikely to find inquiry into "ways of knowing" in a daily newspaper!) However, the article did put in front of the public, some of the serious problems, if not the solutions, of the exclusive application of the ways of knowing we have cultivated until recently.

At the Edinburgh seminar I mentioned at the outset, there were many other scholars sharing a variety of viewpoints similar to the one I am presenting today. I was pleased to find that Professor Lorentz from the University of Cork, introduced an interesting reference which can add to our discussion here. He was speaking about the curiously postmodern approach to understanding in social work which he had found in one of Germany's social pedagogy pioneers. Professor Lorentz suggested that for Alice Solomon, (circa 1926) the most important aspect of social work research "... [was] not the amassing of data but their 'evaluation, comparison and interpretation' "(Lorentz, 2000, p. 4). For Solomon, stated Lorentz, "the subject of the social worker/ observer, [was] indeed not neutral." Prof. Lorentz suggested that Solomon's version of "subjectivity cum universality...[was] at one and the same time hopelessly dated and acutely modern." (Lorentz , 2000, p. 4)

The re-validation of thinking which goes beyond the mechanistic practices that have prevailed in the human services and educational professions, particularly in the US for the past three decades, can have important consequences for practice in very unique environments (Schon, 1983). A point of view which is more holistic and tuned to irregularities as well as regularities might better accommodate what practitioners face in social work, particularly in small town, rural or remote areas . As I reflected on the status of social work and social research in and about small community life and life-style, validating the subjectivity of the "observer/researcher" described by Professor Lorentz can open many new avenues.

Let me offer an example from social work. For years practitioners have searched, often in vain, for the common characteristics that make social work practice in rural areas congruent with practice in other more urban settings where social work was firmly established: the search was for the generalizations that would "validate" the practice. Yet, social workers in non-urban environments often found that some of the basic principles that their urban counterparts advocated for, were not relevant to their practice or research. They found that applying urban rules to rural settings was fraught with difficulties. "Objectivity" was a case in point. Perhaps, rural people were more motivated by personal attachments and responded better to individuals they knew and identified with than their urban counterparts. Practitioners also found that uses of space and time were more unique in rural settings, thus rendering urban "efficiency" measures less than useful. They found out that rural people related to concepts of space and geography differently. They also found out that in rural families social variables were differently defined and regarded. Kinship , for instance, meant something different in a small town, and thus, help or lack of help for a needy individual needed to be contextually understood. Different perspectives had to be used to judge what was normative or what was idiosyncratic. Furthermore, rural practitioners and scholars discovered that there could be no one single rural meta theory, because environments and circumstances differed . In the environment of rural practice, judgement and observation of individuals circumstances were by far more important than meta theories.

Finally, as rural environments become more and more heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity and cultures, ruralities discovered that they needed to search for understandings in very different ways and that the insights developed were also quite varied. Particularly but not exclusively in the U.S., cultural and racial heterogeneity determined the need for social workers to

connect with those they served in very particular ways. African Americans, Latinos, Carribeans, Native Americans, recent Asian immigrants and a myriad of other groups did not always share the prevailing paradigms of *technical rationality*. For these groups the world was different, untidy, not value-free and objective but value laden and political. Their context and language referents were not those of the industrial northern European world. It was clear that no single "Truth" would be acceptable to the mosaic of races, cultures and traditions, sexual diversity and lifestyles.

Minority voices, often subjugated in the past, became more clear, stronger and articulate. While at times, in the not so distant past, these groups may have tried to move away from their own paradigms to fit the modern condition, what is happening politically, literally, and culturally in the world has put a stop to unquestioned adaptation. The spiritual and non-concrete characteristics of many ancient voices of native wisdom further underscored the necessity of understanding and validating other world views.

A New Look at Social Science Possibilities

In a recent work, Irving (1999) wrote:

> Until the 1960s the rule of science was a characteristic of modernity in academic life; however, since then there has been a trend , gradually establishing a region of postmodernism, that runs counter to a faith in a universal and objective scientific methodology. Since the publication of Thomas Kuhn's The Structure of the Scientific Revolutions (1962),most scholars have come to agree that science itself rests on assumptions that lie beyond scientific proof. 'In the humanities in recent years', writes historian George Marsden,'much of the most heralded scholarship has been directed toward attacking the assumptions that there should be one objective, scientifically based outlook on which all fair minded people should agree.' " (Irving,1999, p.30)

It is not the purpose of this presentation to attack any one paradigm. Rather, my goal is to introduce the idea that the one "objective, scientifically based outlook on which all fair minded people should agree" is no more. Changes in research epistemology encouraged by post-modernist thinking offer an opportunity for professionals in the rural field to construct their own theories Researchers and practitioners at the 'fringes' have the opportunity of building and asserting their views without apology. While at one time existing paradigms and world views precluded or invalidated different ways of looking at the world, revolutionary changes in the social sciences have done away with the need to apologize for or justify attention paid to uniqueness or differences. At least for intellectual discourse in the postmodernist world, the old games (often games of numbers only) for establishing standards have been unmasked.

I believe that rural practitioners whether in social work or education have been attempting to transform ways of knowing in the social sciences for a long time. For many decades they have been saying that theories validated in the cities— whether addressing the optimal size of schools, or the value of standardized testing, or the ways to approach social problems, or the direction of specializations in many helping professions, were not useful in non-urban environments. But the dominant world view denied the validity of their position. Generalizations were drawn from sampling and thus power was vested on existing theories. Ruralites were fighting a losing battle, where the cards were stacked against their unique points of view . As Kuhn (1962) had suggested, standards of rationality and the standards for the evaluation of paradigms were paradigm dependent themselves and the cards were stacked with the numbers. But postmodernist thinking has questioned those dominant standards. Feminists have done the same by transforming feminist inquiry, to study the world from feminist standpoints (McCarl Nielsen, 1990). A standpoint, writes McCarl Nielsen, is 'a position in society from which certain features of reality come into prominence and from which others are obscured' (1990, p. 24). Postmodernists have broken the ties that bound most social scientists to particular points of view.

In a study of Foucault, Chambon (1999) suggested that at junctures where "established ways of knowing are no longer helpful guides... we may find it comforting to step outside our tracks and confront shifting realities." (Chambon, 1999, p. 53). Chambon further suggests that

> ...transformative knowledge is disturbing by nature. It disturbs commonly acceptable ways of doing and disturbs the person implementing it. It ruffles the smoothness of our habits, [illegible] our certainties, disorganizes and reorganizes our understanding, shakes our complacency, unhinges us from secure mooring. It is serious and 'dangerous' work to take up... (Chambon,1999, p. 53)

Exploring Alternatives

Now, having suggested that rural social scientist and practitioners have opportunities for exploring alternatives in these post modern times, what is it that I propose they move beyond?

At the start of the new millennium, our culture has taken some seriously disturbing turns which ruralites, at least those I have talked to, have worried about. In the field of social services and also in education, the depersonalization of care and of educational practices in favor of routinized approaches to serve the many have been of concern. Let's consider, for example, some common practices in the field of education. Standardized testing, by its very nature, denies the possibility of success to students whose experiences and

strengths are "outside the standard". Yet we know that standards are constructed based on the majority– in post modern terms, the most powerful-- and definitely do not focus on uniqueness. Standardization in anything, discourages the unique and nurtures only the average. Drawing another example from Arizona, in a language rich milieu, teachers are often discouraged from enhancing bilinguality in the classrooms simply because bilinguality as a cultural asset cannot be immediately measured. Educational practices force teachers to develop standard approaches which might be inappropriate for optimum learning in culturally diverse environments. In the name of quality, single standards that admit no variations and require little interpretation are applied. These standards become the "standpoints", which, as McCarl Nielsen suggested, permit only certain features to come into prominence while others are obscured. Yet, the dissatisfaction with educational services has resulted in a wave of home schooling and lack of confidence in educational institutions which historically had done a good job preparing individuals for new challenges. The risk of not looking for alternatives is that of throwing the baby out with the bath water.

In other helping professions, organizations have become large beyond control and have began to deny values which are generally desirable. For example, doctors are finding it hard to focus on healing patients as individuals; social workers have abandoned caring in favor of "managing" care; educators have moved away from teaching and learning in favor of managing classrooms. Yet, researchers seldom challenge these trends. The blind assumption is oftentimes that if it is the way of the many, and consequently, assumed to be not only good for all but intrinsically more valuable.

I have heard many teachers comment about their dissatisfaction with the "latest measure" of outcomes to which they have been subjected – not just in rural but in urban environments. Yet no one stops these practices often because individuals have been convinced they are the result of advanced scientific thinking, based on the perspectives of the many. Unable to claim large followings, ruralites often feel all the have is narratives to the contrary. Well, narratives have now been validated and ruralites have the responsibility to disseminating them.

If postmodernists have taught us anything it is that there are no single truths, that there are many valuable perspectives, that no one "reality" is intrinsically more "real" than another because the line between the subjective and the objective is very blurred. Often, what has been labeled "truth" are the established interpretations of phenomena.

Postmodern perspectives in the social sciences offer the opportunity of validating the unique contributions of those who think outside the paradigm. This is a rare opportunity for constructing a rural discourse that utilizes the varying perspectives or rural women, rural minorities and rural professionals of all types. The test of numbers might be useful in some instances but it is no longer the only arbiter of truth. What is important is the multi-faceted discourse itself and the judgement that should follow such discourse. Our basic guidelines should be the assertion of life enhancing-- as distinct from life denying-- values and practices.

So often, the first step to change is to establish a counter discourse that will lead to new interpretations. The examples above offer interesting arenas for the beginning of a rural counter discourse. But there are many others. Understanding the issue of quality of life has interested many diverse social scientists and humanists. The less quantifiable aspects of quality of life that have always concerned positivists can now be explored and validated through the new paradigms. Whether ways of interacting among people, or spirituality as an important dimension of quality of life, or sustainable agricultural practices that might not be economically efficient, or nostalgic and historical values can all enter the new rural discourse without apology. Recently, Flora (1993) suggested that "understanding the interactions that affect quality of life involves focusing on human values, economics, and political power. Values and power determine what is defined as quality of life and by whom." (in Bird and Ikerd, 1993, p. 96). The door is now open to research these issues not anticipating that a single truth will be found but eagerly searching for a dialogue of alternatives.
Postmodern conceptions have introduced doubt into our certainties. More fundamentally, they have introduced the potential for transformative work.

> Transformative work shows that the present is not natural and need not be taken as inevitable or absolute. Change can come from the realization of the precarious nature of established ways and by inviting the development of alternatives. This holds true for the client and for the worker, researcher and educator. We come close here to the definition of the role of the intellectual, as well as its limit:'The work of the intellectual... is fruitful in a certain way to describe that which-is by making it appear as something that might not be, or that might not be as it is'. (Chambon, 1999, p. 70)

Many of the premises we have painfully come to believe as the way of today are antithetical to rural values and concerns --- bigger is better; most technology is useful or all technology is equally useful; higher outputs automatically improve the quality of life; efficiency is a significant ingredient of life satisfaction for most people; spirituality is no longer valued; personal concern for fellow human beings is no longer possible; size and personalization must be sacrificed to progress, etc. Yet, few researchers or practitioners are challenging them, advocating against them, or even disregarding them. We are all too convinced that the battle has been lost and

that the tools we have at our disposal are useless to "prove" that those premises are in error.

What the new ways of knowing permit us is to challenge these canons for they are only interpretations of a narrowly perceived reality. We can show that by "historicizing our understanding of reality by retracing how particular forms of knowledge have been created and adopted over time..." (Chambon, 1999, p. 78) . The new ways of knowing permit us to bring the subjective close to the surface; not to distance ourselves from the object of study but to speak with the conviction of our experiences. Again, in the words of Chambon " [l]inking subjectivity to actions and knowledge" helps us "better understand how doing constitutes the doer..." (1999, p. 78). These new ways of knowing will permit ruralites to seize the authority of their own views, to study, judge and assess and validate understandings from rural "standpoints", and to mobilize us all for change. Forms of knowledge and practice must be perceived as permissible options with their systems of rules (Chambon, 1999). But the options and the rules can be modified and transgressed to create better, that is, more life enhancing realities.

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